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SUBJECT: ALGERIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGN TRAIL: INFORMATION IN
RESPONSE TO C-NE7-00589

REF: STATE 63767

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford, reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary: The Algerian legislative election, which will conclude with nationwide voting on May 17, has not been much focused on issues. The two major Algerian political parties, FLN and RND, form a presidential coalition with the Islamist MSP party. All three parties in their campaigning for May 17 national parliamentary elections emphasize their agreement with President Bouteflika's so-called economic and political reform program. That program, and the parties' platforms lack detail. The FLN touts itself as the party of "stability and security," as it tries to assure Algerians that it is best able to guide Algeria's final phases of national reconciliation with terrorists following the April 11 bombing of the prime minister's office. The RND, by contrast, emphasizes economic reforms such as reducing unemployment and living standards without explaining how it would seek to do so. The communist Workers' Party which makes clear its opposition to economic privatization and world trade regimes. MSP and the predominately Berber opposition RCD have highlighted corruption as a campaign issue although again without specifics. MSP's fielding of young candidates new to politics aims to hit a chord against an establishment largely perceived as corrupt. The RCD has placed special emphasis on a high voter turnout to prevent fraud at the polls. Ultimately, the voters themselves seek improvement in their economic situation and ask how parliamentarians in a country rich with petrodollars can do so little concern for the people. We often hear that Algerians themselves understand the parliament is a weak institution that has done little to bring about reform. The disinterest in these elections and the political Process does not bode well for a country still grappling with how to marginalize Islamist extremism. End Summary.

DIFFERENCES OF EMPHASIS BETWEEN THE RND AND FLN

12. (C) In the current campaign for national parliament, the National Liberation Front (FLN), National Rally for Democracy (RND) and Movement for a Society at Peace (MSP) -- the presidential coalition -- support the continuation of President Bouteflika's "program," which is broadly defined as economic and political reform. Their perceived need not to stray far from Bouteflika's so-called program for economic and political reform has the downside of making it

difficult for these parties to advocate specific remedies. As one FLN contact told us, no one wants to get in front of Bouteflika on various issues. The result is that the FLN and RND stick generally to platitudes. MSP does the same, with the exception of putting more emphasis on clean government, which is also part of Bouteflika's overall political agenda.

13. (C) On economic issues, it is especially hard to differentiate between the parties. RND's leader, Ahmed Ouyahia, repeatedly says during rallies that RND "is not an opposition party but one of supporting the president's agenda. This support will continue after May 17." RND underscores its support for "economic reforms," "reducing unemployment," and "improving living standards," but its 140-point platform is devoid of details on how to bring about these changes. PM Belkhadem's FLN touts the need for the "full implementation" of national reconciliation, even though our Algerian contacts note that Bouteflika for months has given the impression that the autumn 2005 referendum served as a capstone to that process. One Algerian business source summed it up for many of our contacts when he said the FLN plays the "security card" in highlighting reconciliation with terrorists because it has nothing positive to promote on economic reform. "Stability and security" are the watch words of the FLN, he maintained, because the slogan soothes Algerians who were rattled by the April 11 car bombing of Belkhadem's office.

MSP AND RCD FOCUS ON CORRUPTION

14. (C) The MSP and opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) concentrate their public statements on the need to fight corruption. They diverge in that RCD also speaks frequently of its concern for "fraud" at the ballot box May 17. RCD leader Said Saadi says in nearly every speech that "legitimate apprehensions accompany this poll, and fraud and corruption are feared by all citizens." He then exhorts voters to combat fraud by turning out to vote in high numbers and calls on them to remain politically vigilant, since "the corruption cannot end overnight."

15. (C) By contrast, the Islamist MSP leader Aboudjerra Soltani describes corruption as the root of what ails Algeria and calls upon the government to lift the Emergency Law that bans political demonstrations in Algiers. (In these respects, MSP departs from its fellow presidential coalition parties.) Representing an Islamist philosophy derived from the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, MSP party leaders have told us that Algerians embracing Islam are most often prevented under the Emergency Law from publicly advocating their views. Since young voters do not recall the violence of the 1990s and, as such, do not understand why the Emergency Law was enacted, Soltani often appeals at rallies for their support: "The time has come for the independence generation to participate fully in the country's construction." He also seeks to win their sizable vote by noting that the MSP has fielded more younger, new-to-politics candidates than any other party. MSP contacts believe electing fresh faces is the best antidote to entrenched political corruption and has the added advantage of representing radical change.

MORE CONSERVATIVE ISLAMIST PARTY SLIPPING

16. (C) The more conservative Islah party, under the New leadership of Mohamed Boulahia, is not expected to fare well. (Its office did not return our calls for comment on its campaign strategy.) Our political party contacts across the spectrum tell us that traditional Islah voters, who are loyal to ousted party leader Abdallah Djaballah, will likely follow Djaballah's appeal for a boycott of the polling. Those that do vote will cast ballots for the MSP or the FLN, according

to our political contacts. The FLN picks up Djaballah votes, they say, because its party leader, PM Belkhadem, is perceived as holding traditional, conservative views.

LOOKING TO THE FAR LEFT: LOUISA HANOUNE

17. (C) If voters are looking for specificity on issues, Louisa Hanoune's Workers' Party offers the most. She calls on Algerians to "defend the national sovereignty and natural resources through a purely Algerian policy not dictated by outsiders." She often rails against the U.S. specifically, criticizing American policies in the Middle East and the recent Embassy warden message about a threat in Algiers. Her public affairs officer, Abdelhamid Boubaghla, told us that she and her party believe "foreigners want to impose their views on Algeria for the benefit of outsiders." He affirmed that the Workers' Party would "put up roadblocks against any action opposing the Algerian people's interests." As Louisa Hanoune is fond of saying at rallies, the Workers' Party "rejects the government's policy of privatization and seeks to guarantee and preserve Algerian sovereignty by keeping funds in the hands of the public and its trustees." She calls for the abolishment of the ministry responsible for privatizing state enterprises and describes the "rules and regulations of globalization" as a "genuine Tsunami for developing countries' economies." Hanoune also receives much applause when she calls on the government to provide water and electricity for Algerians, rather than selling off the country's riches to foreigners. (Comment: It is notable that few Algerians publicly challenge Hanoune's statist economics. Her popularity among ordinary Algerians is indicative of the challenge the presidential coalition parties face in touting economic reform, which Algerians by and large see as benefiting the corrupt few, not the masses. End Comment.)

WHAT DO THE VOTERS WANT?

18. (C) Algerian voters in their conversations with us and our contacts most often cite five concerns of greatest importance to them:

- raising living standards;
- improving education;
- providing workers with salary increases;
- creating jobs;
- creating more housing.

Youssef Boumezbar, professor of sociology Algiers University Algiers said that Algerians are looking for "permanent solutions to their problems, especially chronic unemployment." Second to unemployment, he cited bolstering salaries as the greatest need. He commented that Algerians do not understand how the country has foreign exchange reserves approaching 100 billion dollars while none of the political parties (aside from the Workers' Party) so much as considers spending them on social needs. Abdallah Massoud, an economics student at the University of Algiers, lamented (in what is a common refrain) that parliamentarians do not care about ordinary citizens and their problems. He noted that they are never on the floor of parliament during televised debates. He commented that the money being spent on infrastructure Improvements has not generated employment or lead to a better life for Algerians, a point we have heard from others.

COMMENT

19. (C) Nearly every Algerian predicts the FLN or RND will score the highest tallies on May 17. Political party contacts privately tell us they expect the Workers' Party to emerge as the largest

opposition party following the elections. While there have been no overt attempts to buy votes with infrastructure projects (and this would be difficult because all three coalition parties are represented in the government), concerns that the government may rig the results May 17 are widespread.

¶10. (C) Two days before the polling, there are two other striking observations compared to the legislative elections of 1997. In ten years, the Islamist parties are widely perceived to be substantially weaker. In 1997, most observers expected the MSP to either finish first or second. We have met no one who expects that now, and not only because of the possibilities of election fraud. The party's leader has not made an especially convincing case that the party would act differently on corruption, and its association with the government has stripped it of the charm of an opposition party. Second, in 1997 public interest was minimal until about two weeks before the election. In the last two weeks we saw a surge in public discussion and attendance at election events. That did not happen this time, and the disinterest in politics does not bode well for a country still grappling with how to marginalize Islamist extremism.

FORD